

The Saga of Saving and Reconstructing

RAMSAY HOUSE

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Ramsay House, located at 221 King Street, is a cultural icon in Alexandria, generally referred to as the oldest house in the city. Today its distinctive outline is a symbol of the historic heritage of Alexandria. It currently is the city's visitor center and offices for the Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association. [Illustration #1] The route to becoming a cultural icon took more than ten years and was a torturous path filled with numerous threats to demolish the building. By the time the building was reconstructed in 1956 it was more a product of the early years of the reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg than a typical Alexandria Colonial era building. That few question its authenticity is a testament to how much Alexandria citizens and visitors want to have a tangible link to the eighteenth century past of the city.

By most accounts Ramsay House is considered the oldest building in Alexandria and dates ascribed for its construction range from 1695 to 1751.¹ Its reputation as the oldest house was well established by the early twentieth century.² Indeed, the building was recorded by the Historic American Buildings Survey, a part of the National Park Service, in 1936 with both measured drawings and photographs. It was originally the home of William Ramsay, one of the founding trustees of Alexandria and a prosperous merchant.

In the first part of the twentieth century the building served variously as a

¹	Dates ascribed for the construction of Ramsay House:
Date	Source
1695	Milton Grigg, 1949 bicentennial edition of <i>Gazette</i>
1724	Program for dedication of building, 1956
pre-1732	<i>Gazette</i> article, 1947
1725	<i>Gazette</i> article, 1963
1748	Fundraising brochure, 1944
1751	<i>The History of Old Alexandria, Virginia</i> , 1928

The most definitive work on Alexandria architecture, Ethelyn Cox's *Historic Alexandria Street by Street, A Survey of Existing Early Buildings*, sidesteps the issue and diplomatically notes: "A 1956 reconstruction, based on early photographs of the house of William Ramsay..." Another standard work on Alexandria notes that Ramsay House is "reputed to be Alexandria's earliest structure..." William Francis Smith and T. Michael Miller, *A Seaport Saga, Portrait of Old Alexandria, Virginia*, (Norfolk, Virginia, The Donning Company, 1989), p.128.

² Mary G. Powell, *The History of Old Alexandria, Virginia from July 13, 1749 to May 24, 1861*, originally published in 1928. Reprinted with a new index by Wesley Pippenger (Westminster, Maryland, Family Line Publications, 1995), p.170.

cigar factory, antique shop(s), apartments and a tea room.³ Reportedly the building was also popular as a house of ill repute during the early years of World War II that catered to the workers at the Navy's Torpedo Factory less than a block away. Thus, by the mid-1940s the building's history was known, but certainly not celebrated. It was just part of the collection of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century buildings on the lower blocks of King Street that were slowly deteriorating and primarily industrial in use. Unlike Gadsby's Tavern or the Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Shop, both of which were restored during the 1930s, Ramsay House never garnered the same type of interest or attention.⁴ [Illustration #2]

By 1931, an article in the *Alexandria Gazette* noted that the house was little known by the people of the City and, furthermore, that "Various architectural changes...have almost destroyed the original and quaint appearance of the building...However, those who know it picture it an ancient and charming residence...The spot remains hallowed by memories of the immortal Washington. It was here that his cousin, Anne McCarty resided with her husband William Ramsay who built the house...."⁵

In late 1942, Ramsay House suffered a devastating fire that swept the whole building from basement to attic.⁶ Because of the marginal economy of the immediate neighborhood, the building was left vacant and boarded up. However, the Alexandria fire department did not condemn the building precisely because its historic importance was well known. The fire department chief was even quoted as saying "I should like to see the Ramsay House restored as a museum." There had been sporadic efforts in the late 1930s and early 1940s to seek to restore the building but nothing became of them because there was no funding. The principal leader of these efforts was Rebecca Ramsay Reese, the great-great-granddaughter of William Ramsay, who was quoted as saying that the only obstacle to the

³ Tea rooms were a popular phenomenon of the first three decades of the 20th century. They were "part-home, part-business" that were operated by women and provided a very real alternative to eating in hotels and bars and often served as a means for the preservation of historic buildings. On the tea room phenomenon, see, Cynthia A. Brandimarte, "To Make the Whole World Homelike' Gender, Space, and America's Tea Room Movement," *Winterthur Portfolio*, v. 30, no.1, Spring 1995, pp.1-19.

⁴ Indicative of this lack of recognition is the fact that one standard, though outdated, reference work on Alexandria architecture makes no mention of the Ramsay House and it is not included as an extant pre-1830 building in the list that is provided. See, Deering Davis, Stephen P. Dorsey, and Ralph Cole Hall, *Alexandria Houses, 1750-1830*, (New York, New York, Bonanza Books, 1946).

⁵ F.A. Long, "Washington's Cousin Lived in Old House", *Alexandria Gazette*, 1/1/1931, p.10. Hereafter, *AG*.

⁶ "Posey Rescues Woman as Fire Sweeps Ancient Ramsay House", *AG*, 12/8/1942, p.1.

restoration "was the lack of adequate money to buy and repair the old building."

Then on April 17, 1944 the *Alexandria Gazette* printed the astounding announcement that the Ramsay House was to be demolished within two weeks for "an air-conditioned office building." The newspaper characterized the possible demolition of the building as a "catastrophe".⁷ The new owner of the property, Frank Koplin a builder from Washington, clearly knew that the proposed demolition would create widespread opposition and sought to deflect some of it by offering to give the building "to any person or group who will move it from its present site."

There was immediate reaction to the *Gazette's* front page article. By the following day, three organizations expressed interest in saving the building. The Kiwanis Club was interested in the building for meeting rooms; residents in Yates Garden expressed an interest in moving the building to that section of the city for use for community meetings and recreation space; and, the Thornton Society, an early national preservation organization, discussed the importance of the building and sought ways to save it. Additionally, members of the City Council were approached about the City of Alexandria acquiring the building.⁸ At the City Council meeting the night following the publication of the *Gazette* article "one of the largest delegations of recent times" urged the City to take some action to save the building. All sorts of hyperbole was used in an effort to convince Council of the importance of the building with the spokeswoman for the Colonial Dames saying that the building had "greater historical significance than the Betsey Ross House in Philadelphia." The *Gazette* printed an open letter from nationally known restoration architect Thomas Tileston Waterman urging action to save the building. He wrote: "During the 16 years in which I have been making an intensive study of Virginia's early buildings, I have never encountered another example of its type, with as many curious and foreign qualities... The house royally deserves sympathetic consideration in its present plight."⁹

⁷ "Ramsay House to be Torn Down", *AG*, 4/17/1944, p.1.

⁸ "3 Groups Act Here to Save Ramsay House", *AG*, 4/18/1944, p.1.

⁹ "Council Studying Request to Save Old Ramsay House", *AG*, 4/19/1944, p.1. Fay Campbell Kaynor, "Thomas Tileston Waterman, Student of American Colonial Architecture," *Winterthur Portfolio*, v. 20, nos. 2 & 3, Autumn 1985, p. 103. He was one of the original architects for the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg beginning in 1928 and was responsible for the restoration or reconstruction of such buildings as the Governor's Palace. Waterman (1900-1951) "became involved in most of the key projects in the eastern seaboard states that affected buildings of the colonial period and the early Republic. His attitudes and opinions influenced many decisions bearing on the treatment or recording of historic American buildings." He was the author of a number of influential architectural books including *Domestic Colonial Architecture of Tidewater Virginia* (1932) with John Barrows; *Mansions of Virginia* (1946); and, *The Dwellings of Colonial America* (1950). Waterman was likely the individual who was responsible for ensuring that the Ramsay House was recorded by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in 1936. Beginning in 1933 he became the

Waterman also quickly took private action to help save the Ramsay House. He wrote to William Sumner Appleton, Director of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities in Boston and urged him to write to the Mayor urging preservation of the building. Appleton was one of the most influential preservationists of the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁰

Realizing the vehement opposition to the proposed demolition, the owner voluntarily agreed to halt action three days after the *Gazette* had published its first article about the impending demolition. Even after Mr. Koplin withdrew his plans, the newspaper remained the leading voice for the preservation of the building and went so far as to commission a drawing that depicted what the restored Ramsay House might look like. At the same time, the American Legion which had saved Gadsby's Tavern, pledged \$500 toward the restoration of the Ramsay House with the assumption that there would be some organization formed for that purpose. City Treasurer Roger Sullivan agreed to hold the monies for the expected restoration effort.¹¹

The following week organizational efforts began in earnest. A formal committee from numerous citizen associations was established and Sullivan was named chairman of the "Committee to Save Ramsay House." Meanwhile, the City Council in an executive session the previous week had voted to explore purchasing the property and had entered into private discussions with the owner. City Council received numerous telegrams from national and state historic preservation organizations urging them to take action to save the building. At the same time both the Alexandria Association and the *Gazette* pledged money to the fledgling drive.¹² With all the interest and pressure, what the paper characterized as

assistant architect in the National Park Service who was responsible for review of all HABS documentation and was a resident of Alexandria residing in an apartment in Rebecca Ramsay Reese's house at 517 Cameron Street.

¹⁰ Thomas Waterman to William Sumner Appleton, April 21, 1944. Alexandria Library Special Collections. On Appleton see, Jane Brown Gillette, "Appleton's Legacy," *Historic Preservation*, v.46, no.4, July/August 1994, pp.32ff. and Charles B. Hosmer, *Presence of the Past*, (New York, New York, G.P. Putnam Sons, 1965), pp.115ff.

¹¹ "Demolition Halted Pending Issue on Old Ramsay House", *AG*, 4/20/1944, p.1 and *AG*, 4/21/1944, p.1; "Legion Pledges \$500 to Open Drive for Ramsay House", *AG*, 4/21/1944, p.1

¹² "City Groups Meeting Today to Map Ramsay House Drive", *AG*, 4/24/1944, p.1; "Ramsay House Unit Organizes", *AG*, 4/25/1944, p.1. The civic groups that were involved included Post 24 of the American Legion, Rotary Club, Kiwanis Club, Lions Club, Women's Club, Garden Club, United Daughters of the Confederacy, Kate Waller Barrett Chapter and Alexander Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Alexandria Association. "Thornton Society Appeals for Action on Ramsay House", *AG*, 4/26/1944, p.1. It is perhaps testament to the community's sentiment about Ramsay House that all these groups could coalesce within a period of days, it is even more remarkable that they did, because most of the organizations had discontinued activities for the duration of World War II. Council received telegrams not only from the

"frantic citizen efforts," City Council really had little choice other than to acquiesce to the demands of the citizens. By May 2, 1944 the Council had concluded negotiations with the owner of the property to purchase the building for \$9,500 with the understanding that a private organization would undertake the restoration of the building. The Council action came only two weeks after the *Gazette* had broken the story of the proposed demolition. Sullivan was quoted as saying: "The City will never regret purchasing this sacred landmark...." Council justified the purchase as creating a landmark that would lead to increased tourism in the City after the end of World War II and as a centerpiece for the bicentennial celebrations that would mark the two hundredth anniversary of the founding of the City in 1949.¹³

Obviously the next step was the formation of an actual organization that would have as its central focus the restoration of the building and efforts to do so began the following week. The new organization was named the Ramsay House



Illustration #3—Conjectural sketch of the restored Ramsay House by William Haussmann that was used in the fundraising brochure printed by the Alexandria Historical Society in 1944. According to published accounts, Thomas Tileston Waterman, a well known authority on eighteenth century architecture, was consulted as to its accuracy. In this rendition the front door opens onto North Fairfax Street and the chimney on the south side of the building is internal to the structure. Source: Alexandria Association MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

Restoration Association and Sullivan was again elected president. Things seemed to be off to a fast start when within the week, Mrs. T.S. Taliaferro, a sister of Rebecca Ramsay Reese, pledged \$500 to the effort. At the same time the Mount Vernon Chapter of the DAR pledged that it would "do everything in our power" to

Thornton Society but also from Milton Grigg, the president of the Northern Virginia Chapter of the American Institute of Architects as well as the president of the Columbia Historical Society in Washington, DC; "Ramsay Action Assured", *AG*, 4/26/1944, p.1.

¹³ "City Completes Deal to Buy Ramsay House", *AG*, 5/3/1944, p.1; "Landmark Purchase Up Tonight", *AG*, 5/5/1944, p.1; "Committee to Map Campaign", *AG*, 5/10/1944, p.1.

support the restoration project.¹⁴ By the end of the month the fledgling organization had launched a fundraising drive and printed a solicitation brochure complete with a conjectural drawing of a restored Ramsay House. [Illustration #3] The effort had an ambitious, if somewhat naive, plan in which every citizen in the City would contribute and that the drive to raise the \$20,000 estimated restoration costs could be concluded within a two-week period. As the brochure noted "We know your civic pride is such that you will be eager to help financially in this project."¹⁵ Many proved not to be so eager and this initial effort was doomed to failure.

City Council concluded that the group's campaign was a bit too optimistic and directed them to incorporate as a non-profit organization. At the same time, as a means of hedging their bets, City Council appointed its own committee to monitor the progress of the group's efforts. Named to the City Council committee were City Councilman Everett Hellmuth, City Manager Carl L. Budwesky and City Attorney Joseph M. Pancoast.¹⁶

It was not until the middle of July that the Ramsay House group got around to developing a formal proposal for incorporation. The plan that was presented was somewhat more ambitious and farsighted than merely the restoration of the building. It called for the formation of an Alexandria Historical Society which would have as its first and central goal the restoration of the building, but would also act as a primary advocate for protection of landmarks in Alexandria and a "central clearing house" for all the public landmarks in the city. The proposal envisioned hiring an architect "experienced in the restoration of Colonial structures of this area of the country." The proposal was somewhat more vague on the use of Ramsay House itself. In general terms it was proposed that two rooms in the building be set aside for the display of "historic relics" while the other rooms and basement could be used for "club meetings, social functions and other gatherings."

¹⁴ "Committee to Map", *ibid.*; "Sullivan Heads Civic Group Formed for Ramsay Campaign", AG, 5/12/1944, p.1; and, "Mrs. Taliaferro Donates \$500 to Ramsay Restoration Fund", AG, 5/17/1944, p.1. Mrs. Taliaferro was the widow of the Governor of Wyoming and vice-regent of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association from Wyoming. "Restoration of Ramsay House Gains Support of DAR Chapter", AG, 5/17/1944, p.3.

¹⁵ "Ramsay Campaign Launched", AG, 5/29/1944, p.1; the fundraising brochure is in the Alexandria Library Special Collections, Box 240.

¹⁶ "Ramsay Group Takes Action to Incorporate", AG, 6/2/1944, p.1; "City, Ramsay Officials to Meet Tuesday for Final Decisions", AG, 6/14/1944, p.1; and, "Wilkins Names Hellmuth to Ramsay Group", AG, 6/27/1944, p.1.

The plan had the endorsement of the City Council appointed committee.¹⁷

Months passed and nothing tangible happened to the house. By the middle of December the *Gazette*, which had been the early cheerleader for the preservation of the building, could not contain itself any longer and published an editorial which chided the organization for not doing anything and warned that the coming winter months could mean disaster for the building which was open to the elements. The editorial apparently had the desired effect because shortly thereafter Councilman Hellmuth introduced a resolution which called for the city to undertake the work before weather completed the demolition process. The Ramsay House Committee, however, said that they had not done anything precisely because they were waiting for some action from City Council. At the same time, they acknowledged that they had not raised the necessary funds to undertake the restoration work. A compromise was reached, and Council agreed that the Historical Society would be "exclusively" responsible for the restoration while the City would maintain title to the building.¹⁸

Again, no work was done on the building. Months passed and the Ramsay House group had still not incorporated and apparently indicated to City Council that they would not do so until the details of a lease of the building from the city to the organization were completed. Finally in November 1945, eighteen months after the city had originally purchased the building, the Ramsay House group was ready to present its restoration plans to City Council. In noting the "snail-like pace of progression", the *Gazette* quoted the defensive Sullivan as saying "a job done slowly but well is more desirable than one done quickly and poorly." By the end of 1945 the Ramsay House group and the City had agreed to the terms of a lease which called for the group to restore the building with the proviso that a portion of the building would be for public use.¹⁹

By this time the Ramsay group needed the expert advice of a restoration architect and approached a number of Alexandria architects about their ideas for the restoration, cost estimates and fee schedule. They selected Milton Grigg, an Alexandria native who had been part of the original Colonial Williamsburg

¹⁷ "Ramsay House Plan Ready", *AG*, 7/17/1944, p.1.; The Alexandria Historical Society organized in 1944 should not be confused with the present Historical Society which was founded in 1975.

¹⁸ "Unfinished Business", editorial, *AG*, 12/14/1944, p.4; "Council Weighs Plan to Repair Historic Home", 2/13/1945, p.1; and, "Committee to Restore Landmark", 2/14/1945, p.1.

¹⁹ "To Discuss Ramsey [sic.] House Restoration", *AG*, 4/27/1945, p.1; "Ramsay House Restoration Hangs Fire", *AG*, 6/12/1945, p.1; "Ramsay House to Get Hearing Again, Nov. 2", *AG*, 10/22/1945, p.1; "Ramsay House Restoration Plans Complete", *AG*, 11/10/1945, p.1; and, "Ramsay House Group Told to Incorporate", *AG*, 12/2/1945, p.1

architectural staff in the late 1920s and early 1930s and, who had an active practice in the restoration of historic buildings in Virginia.²⁰ Thomas Tileston Waterman was disappointed that he had not been selected and wrote to Clyde Lamond, the group's vice-president that his experience in the restoration work at Gadsby's Tavern and the Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Shop provided an excellent background with which to undertake the work at the Ramsay House.²¹

By mid-1946 the City Council gave up on the Ramsay House group and opted to use the building for additional city government offices and voted to house the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court in the structure. Council members expected opposition from the historical society and they were not wrong. The newspaper described the group as "incensed" over the City proposal. The group noted that their efforts to "restore" the building were severely hampered by the fact that building materials were in very short supply after the end of World War II. The group insisted that the building should be an "historic shrine" and not be put to use as an office annex to City Hall. Faced with vigorous lobbying by the Society, Council backed down from its intent to move court offices into the building less than two weeks after they had first proposed the change in use. The Council resolution authorizing the continuing restoration efforts was made by First Ward Councilman Thomas A. Hulfish, Jr. Councilman Hellmuth added a provision giving the Society an additional two and a half years to complete its work.²²

Even if the Council proposal had been a canard, it did serve to light a fire under the Society, and they began a more public role with their plans for the restoration of the building. Within six weeks of the Council threat, Grigg had produced a perspective drawing of a "restored" Ramsay House that was used in

²⁰ Milton Grigg (1905-1982) received his architecture degree from the University of Virginia in 1929 and immediately began work at Colonial Williamsburg. He went into private practice in 1933 and, in the mid-1930s, was the restoration architect for Gadsby's Tavern. Later he was the restoration architect for Monticello. Grigg was nationally known as an ecclesiastical architect and designed a hundred or more churches nationwide. In the historic district of Alexandria he was responsible for the design of the Parish Halls for both Christ Church on North Washington Street (1950) and St. Paul's Episcopal Church on South Pitt Street (1947). See, "The Making of a Profession, Ten Who Made a Difference", *Inform*, v.5, no.3, pp. 24-25. Grigg entry by Roulhac Toledano. "Under his leadership, restoration of historic buildings was made a respectable endeavor for architects."

²¹ "Society Will Apply for Charter", *AG*, 12/2/1945, p.1; Waterman to Clyde Lamond, October 31, 1945, Alexandria Library Special Collections, vertical files.

²² "Juvenile Court Will Use Old Ramsay Structure", *AG*, 4/17/1946, p.1; "Ramsay Society Incensed", *AG*, 4/18/1946, p.1; "Society to Fight Ramsay Site Use", *AG*, 4/17/1946, p.1; "City Abandons Plans to Use Ramsay House", *AG*, 4/26/1946, p.1.

fundraising efforts.²³

Over the course of the next six months, through the summer and fall of 1946, Grigg proceeded with his restoration investigation and research of Ramsay House. By the spring of 1947 the Society had mapped out and had implemented a serious fundraising effort. As a first step the organization changed leadership and Councilman Hellmuth was elected president. As the campaign began significant gifts were made to the Society by the Alexandria Association; prestigious endorsements of the project were secured from the Governor, both United States Senators, the local Congressman and the Mayor; a membership drive headed by



Illustration #4--Ramsay House in late 1947 before reconstruction efforts began. The sign on the house includes Milton L. Grigg's presentation rendering of a restored Ramsay House. Courtesy: Maurice Crabill

²³ "Ramsay House Committee Meets June 7", *AG*, 5/18/1946, p.1; "Need \$25,000 to Restore Ramsay House", *AG*, 6/8/1946, p.1; "Restoration Drawing", *AG*, 6/10/1946, p.1.

Rebecca Ramsay Reese was launched; and, a large poster type sign was put up on Ramsay House portraying the restored building.²⁴ [Illustration #4]

Over the course of the next eighteen months the Society continued to actively raise the funds for the restoration project. Fundraising efforts included a benefit card party and fashion show at Gadsby's Tavern sponsored by the Colonial Dames; a program to physically tag [i.e. touch] members of the public by Alexandria Association volunteers and the proceeds from the 1949 Alexandria Association's annual tour of historic homes.²⁵

One of the problems in attracting significant public interest in the restoration of Ramsay House was the general unsavory reputation of the lower blocks of King Street which, in the early 1950s, were viewed as being in a severely deteriorated and blighted condition and where "the largest concentration of undesirable persons were found in the shadow of city hall and police headquarters."²⁶ Given this perception it is little wonder that many could not see the efficacy of restoring the building.

Despite the optimistic hopes of the Society, the fundraising was spotty and fitful and did not result in anything close to the \$25,000 goal. The hopes of restoring the building for Alexandria's bicentennial celebrations in the summer of 1949 were dashed. By the fall of 1949, there still had been no physical work done on the building. Once again the *Gazette* called into question the ability of the Historical Society to raise the necessary funds and expressed its concern about the deteriorating condition of the building and noted somewhat sarcastically: "Alexandria, unlike Williamsburg, has no Rockeller Foundation to restore it to its Colonial grandeur. Time and nature being what they are, the city may soon have

²⁴ "Hellmuth Elected President of Local Historical Society", *AG*, 2/28/1947, p.1; Historical Society New Heads Named", *AG*, 3/15/1947, p.3; "Historical Society Donates \$500 to Ramsay House Fund", *AG*, 4/19/1947, p.1, 3; "Ramsay House Restoration Sponsors Named; Full Month Set Aside for Fund Drive", *AG*, 4/30/1947, p.1.

²⁵ "Colonial Dames Plan Benefit Style Show for Wednesday", *AG*, 6/8/1948, p.2; "Tag Day Slated to Raise Funds for Ramsay House Restoration", *AG*, 10/15/1948, p.2; "2 Day Homes Tour Slated for May 7-8", *AG*, 3/14/1949, p.1; Ann Pettit, "Society: Washington and Alexandria Residents Tour Historic Homes and Gardens of Alexandria", *AG*, 5/9/1949, p.4.

²⁶ "Vagranti Problem Study is Approved", *AG*, 8/23/1950, p.1; "Readers Write", *AG*, 8/26/1950, p.2; "Readers Write", *AG*, 8/29/1950, p.6.

no Ramsay House either."²⁷ [Illustration #5]



Illustration #5--Presentation rendering of a restored Ramsay House by Milton L. Grigg, 1950. Source: Washington Evening Star

In April 1950 the Historical Society optimistically announced to the City Council that they had pooled resources with the Alexandria Association and had \$9,000 on hand with which to begin restoration work which they said would start by May. The plan, announced by J. Hamilton Seeley, was to begin work on the exterior restoration while "civic organizations" would each be given one room on the interior to "restore." However, there was a yet another problem. Ramsay House was located in the central business fire district which mandated that exterior building materials had to be fireproof. Because the restoration plan called for wood siding, an exception to the fire district regulations was needed before the work could be undertaken. In response to the Society's appeal, City Council, in time honored fashion, appointed a committee to study the matter.²⁸

May came and went, so did the summer, and still nothing happened. The deadline for commencement of actual physical work that had been established by Council was September 1, 1950. By the middle of the month, when it became clear that no restoration work was about to begin, the frustration about the lack of

²⁷ Phil Warren, "Ramsey [sic.] House Decays as Citizens Wait for Steps on Renovation", AG, 10/21/1949, p.1.

²⁸ "Ramsey [sic.] House Project Okayed", AG, 4/12/1950, p.1.

progress in restoring the building reached critical levels. One citizen activist wrote a letter to the Mayor and Council calling for the immediate demolition of Ramsay House and its replacement with surface parking. He chided Council on their lack of backbone in enforcing its own requirements. He wrote that if Ramsay House were "owned by a private individual [it] would have long since been condemned and the owners compelled to tear it down. The Council, being rather sentimental, has from time-to-time acquiesced in the requests of a minority group who are desirous of retaining historical land-marks for posterity, at the expense of the tax payers even if by so doing, it hinders progress and expansion of the City."

At the same time, Council also received an offer from an individual who owned land just across the Potomac River in Maryland to move the house there and restore it at his own expense. He claimed that he had talked with both Rebecca Ramsay Reese and Clyde C. Lamond, two of the staunchest champions of the restoration of the building, and both had expressed no opposition. He said, in fact, that Mrs. Reese saw the plan as a lesser of evils, for as he wrote, "rather than let the house fall into complete ruins it would be better to let someone have the house who would restore it nearby, and thus the house would not be lost forever." Councilman Bragg, who was a member of the Committee appointed by Council to work with the Historical Society, and the Alexandria Association indicated that the groups had apparently given up on the project and had simply failed to inform Council of the fact. Council took both requests under advisement, but indicated that they would give the groups only one more week to show progress or the demolition would be permitted. Alarmed, the *Gazette* published a front page article with the headline: "Removal of Ramsay House is Imminent."²⁹

At the end of the one-week reprieve, it was announced that the National Lumberman's Association was interested in helping fund the restoration, ostensibly because it had much of its original lumber "intact." This trade association was apparently spurred to action by a local resident who was the editor of the *Wood Industries Weekly* and had written several articles in the trade publication about the fate of the Ramsay House.³⁰ Based upon this latest hope, Council once again extended the deadline for beginning the restoration work to early October.

These new threats once again galvanized the Historical Society and the Alexandria Association into action. By the time the deadline approached, finger

²⁹ Lesley B. Mayer to Mayor and City Council, August 28, 1950. Clerk of City Council files; See also, "L.B. Mayer Submits Letter to Council on Ramsay House", *AG*, 9/20/1950, p.2; Donald D. Donohue to Councilman W. Albert Smoot, September 15, 1950, Clerk of City Council files; "Removal of Ramsay House is Imminent", *AG*, 9/20/1950, p.1.

³⁰ "Wood Surviving 2 ½ Centuries", *Wood Industries Weekly*, 1/31/1948, pp.5-6.

pointing at who was to blame for the lack of progress began. At the first fall meeting of the Alexandria Association on October 9, 1950, the Association placed the blame on the Alexandria Historical Society and Milton Grigg, the project's restoration architect. The Association charged that the Historical Society had a "do nothing policy" with respect to the house. Several members were quoted as saying that Grigg had apparently "lost interest in the project after having made an enthusiastic start several years ago." One member, William D. Sisson, was quoted as saying that all Grigg had ever shown the Association's property committee was "a pretty water color painting of the Ramsay House."³¹ Grigg was incensed by the criticism at the Association's meeting and by the ensuing newspaper coverage. [Illustration #'s 6 & 7]

The next day the new president of the Association, Frederick Ford, called Grigg to acknowledge what had happened at the meeting. The following day Grigg fired off a letter to Ford outlining his grievances against the Association and laying out in some detail the reasons that work had not yet commenced on the building. First and foremost, Grigg rightly noted that the Association had no official role in the restoration of the building, which was solely the responsibility of the Historical Society, and thus, he had no formal responsibility to keep the Association informed of progress or lack thereof on the project. He went onto note that he had completed working drawings for the restoration of building in 1947 and that he had gone so far as to also prepare working drawings for the reconstruction of the building if restoration was not deemed feasible. He emphasized that the reconstruction drawings had been done on his own initiative and noted that he was the one responsible for securing the services of the Simpson Brothers as the general contractor for the project. He went on to describe several technical points that had not been resolved in order to allow the project to begin. He concluded that the Association had to take some action to set the record straight regarding his involvement with the project.³²

As a means of sparking the project, the Association appointed a special three person committee to expedite fundraising for the project and to act as a liaison with the Historical Society. William H.S. Stevens was named chairman, and Rebecca Ramsay Reese was appointed as a member along with the Association's president Frederick Ford.³³

³¹ Dorothy H. Kabler, "Ramsay House Removal Attacked", AG, 10/10/1950, p.1.

³² Grigg to Frederick Ford, 10/11/1950. Alexandria Association MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

³³ "Demolition of Ramsay House is Held Up", AG, 9/27/1950, p.1; "Readers Write", Letter of Floyd B. Quigg to Gazette, AG, 10/7/1950, p.2; and Kabler, "Ramsay House Removal Attacked", AG, 10/10/1950, p.1. Stevens was a well known preservationist who lived in the eighteenth century house at 312 Queen Street.

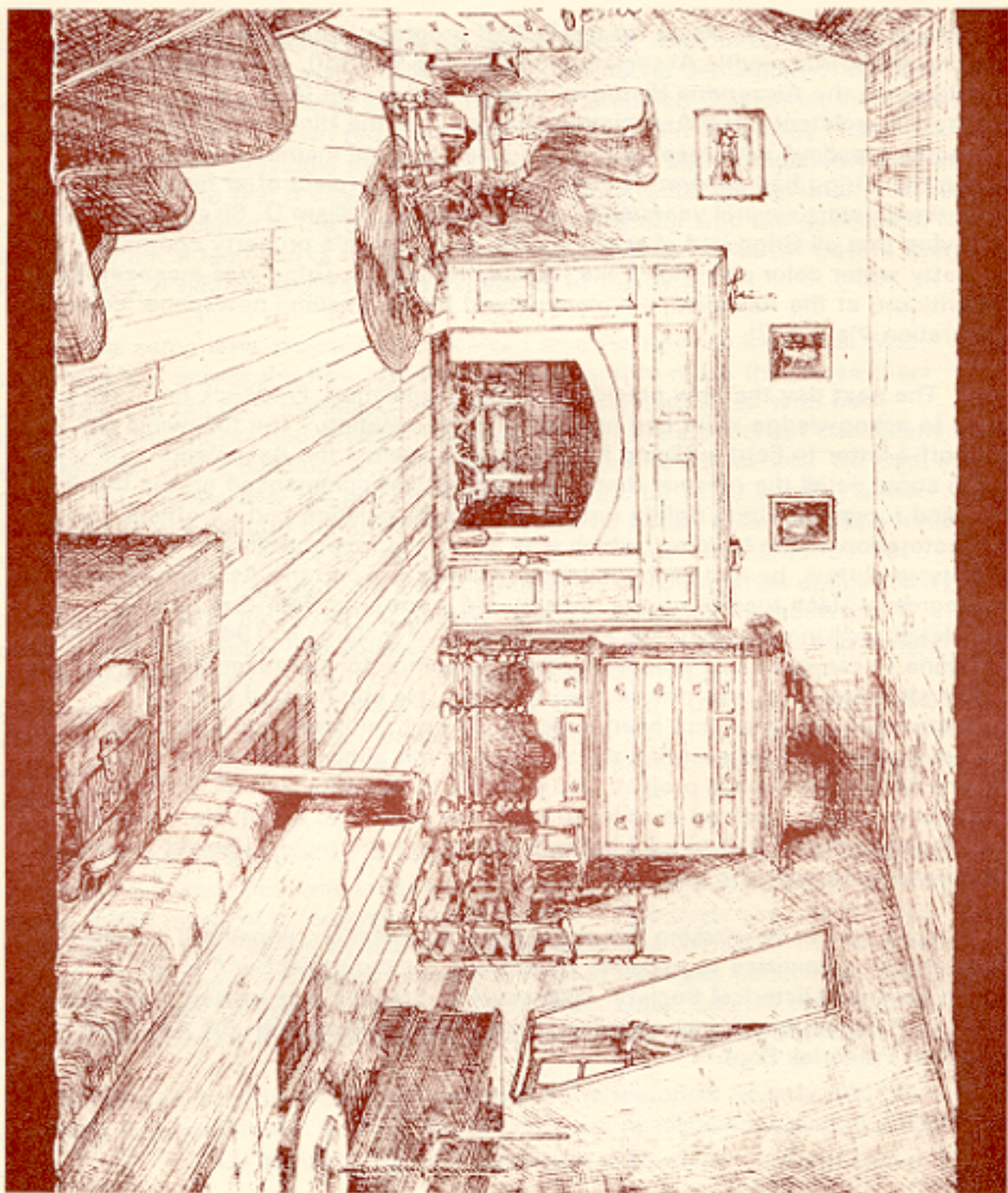


Illustration #6 & 7—Two conjectural drawings of restored bedrooms on the second floor of Ramsay House done by Milton Grigg. Credit: Ramsay MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library

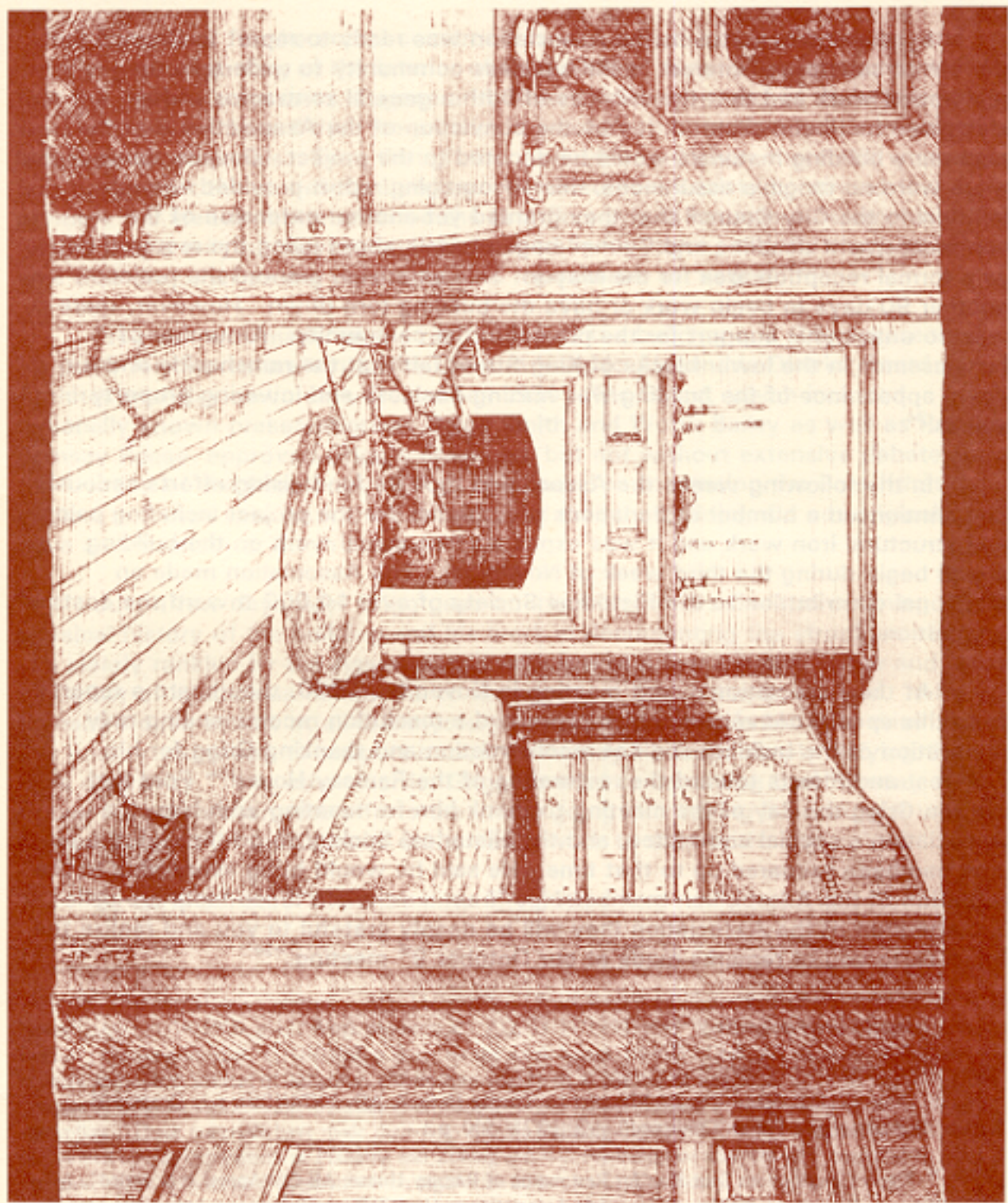


Illustration No. 7

By the end of October, the Association was ready to report to Council that there was substantial interest in the business community to undertake the restoration work and that the services of both a general contractor and an electrician had been secured. It was the conviction of the Association that the necessary building materials would be donated to the project. Despite the fact that there were no tangible assurances, this encouraging report provided enough comfort to the City Council that they granted yet another extension of the commencement deadline and Council began to talk about using the restored house as a formal reception area for the Mayor. This extension granted the project another 90 days to begin work or have the building torn down. However, there was no unanimous support for the project in the community. A number of businessmen in the lower blocks of King Street felt that the ramshackle and run down appearance of the building was hurting business and lowering property values.³⁴

In the following weeks the Association took its fundraising efforts seriously and announced a number of donations of materials for the project including paint and structural iron work and it was expected that actual work on the building would begin during the third week of November. The Association made an additional contribution to the Historical Society of over \$4,000 toward the costs of restoration.³⁵

At the Association's next meeting in November 1950, they heard a report from this special committee which presented a resolution recommending only restoration of the building and not reconstruction and thanking Grigg for his "interest and efforts toward the restoration of the Ramsay House." Ford had written Grigg the day of the meeting to thank him for meeting with him, the Association's special committee, and the Historical Society to go through the plans that had been prepared up to that time. He said he would bring everything to the attention of the Association membership: "I am sure when these facts are called to the attention of the Association they will be deeply grateful to you and realize the injustice to you of remarks made at our October 9th meeting."³⁶

³⁴ Dorothy H. Kabler, "Council May Act on Ramsay House", AG, 10/24/1950, p.1; Dorothy H. Kabler, "Ramsay House Project Continued", AG, 10/25/1950, p.1.

³⁵ "New Contributions Spur Plan for Restoration of Ramsay House; All-Out Appeal is Sounded", AG, 11/2/1950, p.1; Dorothy H. Kabler, "Alexandria Association to Hear Talks on Preserving Antiquities Monday Night at Gadsby Tavern", AG, 11/11/1950, p.3; Dorothy H. Kabler, "Ramsay House Project Praised", AG, 11/14/1950, p.1.

³⁶ Report of the Special Committee to Expedite Restoration of the Ramsay House, 11/13/1950 and Ford to Grigg, 11/13/1950, both Alexandria Association MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

A contract for the actual construction was signed in early November and work began on gutting of the interior of the building. Newspaper accounts noted that the general contractor, Eugene and Clarence Simpson, would undertake the work without profit and that the principal use of the money that had been raised would be for materials. Even though the work was underway there still was no firm plan about the use of the building. The Historical Society continued to promote the idea that one room on the first floor would become a ceremonial office for the City's mayor. Beyond that ideas were quite vague, and the sharpest notion was that the other rooms would become repositories of "relics".³⁷

Progress was made on the restoration of the building and Grigg presented his plans for the restoration to the Old and Historic Alexandria District Board of Architectural Review in early December 1950. The Board, which included nationally known preservationists Delos Smith and Worth Bailey as well as Rebecca Ramsay Reese, approved Grigg's drawings, but not without extensive debate about the location of the front entry. Grigg succeeded in convincing the Board that the original entrance was from the east side and that the building did not originally have an entrance on North Fairfax Street.³⁸

Just a few days later Grigg gave an interview to the *Gazette* outlining the physical history of the building and his work in documenting the structure. He was still clearly rankled by the Association's criticism of a few months earlier and made a number of injudicious comments to the reporter. For example, he said, "why Ramsay House stands at all is a mystery to me. No builder in his right mind would use one by six rafters to support a roof — Ramsay House is simply defying the laws of gravity."³⁹ In other words, Grigg seemed to be saying that Ramsay House did not warrant the efforts that were going into saving it because it was not a good example of the Colonial craftsman's work to start with.

By early January 1951 the new foundation was ready to be installed, and its

³⁷ "Ramsay House Contract", *AG*, 11/10/1950; "Work Begins on Restoration of Historic Ramsay House", *AG*, 11/14/1950, p.1; "Work on Interior", *AG*, 11/17/1950, p.4; "Restoration of Old Ramsay House Begins", *Washington Star*, 11/18/1950, p.B-1. As the work began, John W. Cole, a long time Alexandria resident and ardent student of American architecture who lived at 208 North Fairfax Street, collected numerous samples of original architectural materials from Ramsay House including such items as shingles, nails, noggin and spikes. These materials have made their way into the Building Eighteenth Century Alexandria Database maintained by the Department of Planning and Zoning and will eventually be analyzed and compared to numerous other architectural fragments from eighteenth structures in Alexandria.

³⁸ Minutes of the Old and Historic Alexandria District Board of Architectural Review, 12/5/1950, Minute Book #1, p.79. Files of the Department of Planning and Zoning.

³⁹ Kristin Norling, "Modern Homes Built Better and with Better Materials, Ramsay House Architect Says", *AG*, 12/15/1950, p.3.

installation was done by masons who donated their services to the project through the Simpsons.

By February the Historical Society was boasting of the progress that had been made on the exterior of the building. Their pleasure, however, was muted somewhat by Col. Hellmuth who noted that while the exterior work would protect the interior from the weather, the Society was a long way from realizing the goal of funding the full restoration of the building.⁴⁰ In the late spring of 1951 the addition on the east side of the building had been removed because, according to Grigg, it was a "structure not in keeping with the original building." With its removal Grigg said he was able to determine that the original entrance to the building had faced the river and had not been on the Fairfax Street side of the building as was the case when work began on the building. Further, the removal of the addition showed that there had been dormer windows on the second floor, another factor, that convinced Grigg that the house had originally been oriented east toward the river because these dormer windows would have provided views of the river, according to his theory. The demolition of the addition also conveniently provided enough space to plant a garden which had been envisioned by Grigg as part of the overall project.⁴¹

By the end of May construction fencing had been removed from around the site and the "restored" "sheer white" facade began to become a fixture in downtown Alexandria. In fact, this "restoration" of the Ramsay House was widely seen as an important stimulus to the revitalization of the lower blocks of King Street with a number of retail merchants doing exterior fix-ups.⁴²

Progress on the Ramsay House slowed considerably once the exterior was essentially finished. By the middle of 1952 the City Council was once again called upon to put additional monies into the project so that work could begin on the interior. This additional money was accompanied by the now all too familiar debate about what use the building would serve once it was restored.

The ionic exterior restoration was so distinctive that the 1953 *Gazette* contest "Know Your City" offered gift certificates from a local furniture store to the first three readers who could correctly identify a photograph of the

⁴⁰ "Brick Masons Contribute to Ramsay House", *AG*, 1/8/1951, p.1; "Ramsay House Progresses", *AG*, 1/23/1951, p.8; "Ramsay House Charter Group Roll Opened", *AG*, 2/22/1951, p.1.

⁴¹ "Ramsay House Dormer Window Spaces Uncovered by Workers", *AG*, 5/24/1951, p.4.

⁴² "Painting Job Brightens King Street Block", *AG*, 7/14/1951, p.3.

building.⁴³

By the end of 1953 the City work force had expanded to such a degree that it was clearly apparent that additional space for city workers was needed. The City Manager believed that Ramsay House would be suitable as the headquarters for the Police Department as well as a ceremonial office for the Mayor, thus freeing up much needed office space in City Hall. The City Manager said that additional city money to finish the restoration of the building could be thus justified if the City were to make use of it for City offices.⁴⁴

This lively debate was interrupted when the Federal government unveiled a plan to build an elevated expressway through Alexandria that would take a route along Fairfax Street from the south near Hunting Creek where the roadway would be connected with a new bridge across the Potomac at Jones Point. This plan would result in the demolition of the Ramsay House as well as portions of City Hall making the discussion of the use of Ramsay House a moot issue. Citizens were outraged at such an idea, especially so because the City had received no inkling of the proposal until it was announced by state officials in December 1953.⁴⁵

The idea of an expressway through the heart of Alexandria was found wanting, and more wrangling over the use of the building continued. While individuals were opposed to using the house for headquarters for the Police Department, officially the Alexandria Association, the Historical Society and the Old Town Civic Association endorsed the idea with the caveat that the exterior be maintained in its "colonial character" and that one room be utilized for a ceremonial office for the mayor. These organizations endorsed the plan because they had not been able to raise sufficient funds to restore the building and saw the use of the building for municipal offices as a means of at least assuring the preservation of the building.⁴⁶

A few months later, in May 1954, the Chamber of Commerce came up with a unique way of publicizing the house. As part of an annual Clean Up -- Paint Up

⁴³ "Know Your City", AG, 7/7/1953, p.2.

⁴⁴ "Historic Shrines in Old City Attract Tour Guests from all Over the World", AG, 5/5/1952, p.18; Council appropriated \$1,988 to the Historical Society on 7/22/1952. "Council Seeks Program for Preservation", AG, 1/30/1953, p.1; "Million Dollar Building Plan Discussed by City Council", AG, 11/11/1953, p.1; Jim Buckley, "City Construction Program Declared Easy to Initiate", AG, 11/27/1953, p.2.

⁴⁵ "Beverly Opposes Road Plan, Says Expressway Would Blight Historic City", AG, 12/12/1953, p.1.

⁴⁶ "Council Acts to Reorganize Traffic Board", AG, 1/27/1954, p.8; The mayor was quoted as saying he was opposed to the idea of a ceremonial office in the Ramsay House and that "I can use the City Council Chambers."; "City Use of Ramsay House OK", AG, 1/29/1954, p.1.

week sponsored by Chambers throughout the country, the local chamber decided to see how fast Ramsay House could be painted and to broadcast the pseudo-event on television. Using donated paint and labor Ramsay House was given a new coat of white paint in one hour and forty five minutes on May 1, 1954. This was not a demonstration of the careful analysis and the recreation of historic paints that one normally associates with meticulous restoration projects. The Chamber made the most of the occasion and when "Miss City Beautiful of 1954" visited Alexandria the following month the Chamber proudly showed her the newly painted building.⁴⁷

Despite this burst of publicity, the Ramsay House continued to remain vacant and unfinished. One of the directors of the Alexandria Association who was concerned about the lack of progress on the building felt compelled in 1954 to write down his recollections showing how the Association had been the organizational impetus that was responsible for getting any work on Ramsay House underway. Edward Van Devanter wrote: "Although the Historical Society had been in existence since before the War, they had done nothing constructive to carry on this work [the restoration of Ramsay House]." He went on to say that it was not until April of 1947 that action on the project began to proceed. "It was at this time when the movement was dying on the vine, that the Alexandria Association put its shoulder to the wheel, and became involved in this project."⁴⁸

Finally in late 1955, as part of the City's overall capital improvement program the Council authorized sufficient funds to complete the remaining work. Grigg once again revised his working drawings, and a building permit was issued in December of 1955 for all the remaining interior and exterior work on the building.

It was expected that by the spring of 1956 the reconstruction work could be completed. As completion neared the Hunting Creek Garden Club volunteered to install a "Colonial" garden on the east side of the house. Grigg had designed the garden to complement his "restoration."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ "Repainting of Ramsay House to Feature Clean-Up Week", AG, 4/20/1954, p.5; "Ramsay House to Be Painted As Kick-Off for Annual Drive", AG, 4/23/1954, p.1; "That Ramsay House Painting is Re-Scheduled for Tomorrow", AG, 4/30/1954, p.1 (it rained the on April 24th when the painting had been originally scheduled); "Ramsay House is all A-Glow After 105-Minute Painting Job", AG, 5/3/1954, p.1; "Visit from a Beauty", AG, 6/14/1954, p.6.

⁴⁸ Van Devanter Memorandum, 1/25/1954. Alexandria Association MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

⁴⁹ "Work Completion on Ramsay House Voted", AG, 10/12/1955, p.1; "Restoration of Ramsay House Garden Topic of Hunting Creek", AG, 1/19/1956, p.4. Building Permit #12477, 12/13/1955. Code Enforcement Bureau files, City of Alexandria.

In April the reconstruction of Ramsay House was complete and the building was dedicated on April 14, 1956. A plaque was installed on the building as a memorial to Rebecca Ramsay Reese, a descendant of William Ramsay, and the prominent civic activist who had been instrumental in the early efforts to ensure the preservation of the building who had died the year before.⁵⁰ That second week in April 1956 was an extraordinary week for the Alexandria Association. Not only did the Association sponsor the dedication of the Ramsay House, Milton Grigg spoke about his restoration work at Monticello and Ramsay House at their regular meeting that week, conducted their annual Old Homes tour, and perhaps most importantly, that week in April marked the opening of the "Our Town: 1749-1865" exhibition at Gadsby's Tavern. "Our Town" is, arguably, the most important local exhibition that has ever been mounted of Alexandria consisting of portraits and works of art.⁵¹

A brochure published for the dedication ceremony glossed over the torturous road to completion and merely noted that "The Ramsay House miraculously escaped destruction by fire in 1942." The issue of the use of the building remained, however. The house was dedicated as the ceremonial offices of the Mayor with the vague goal of using it for activities "relating to preservation of historic records" of the City. The dedication brochure stated that the Alexandria Association would have its headquarters on the first floor. The Association has always been a volunteer effort and, as such, has not had the need for a "headquarters." The building never served as the headquarters for the Police Department or any other major city office. Since 1973 it has been the Alexandria Visitor's Center and the first impression that many form of Alexandria's historic buildings.

In 1983 Col. William Glasgow presented a paper entitled "Alexandria, A Leader of the Restoration Movement" to a seminar at the Northern Virginia Community College in which he presented an entirely different picture of how and why Ramsay House came to be restored. Col. Glasgow's presentation was quite personal and critical of virtually every aspect of historic preservation that took place in Alexandria from its beginnings in the 1930s. He characterized the preservation movement as the "destruction movement." In the paper he claimed

⁵⁰ Actually two plaques were installed on the building. A bronze one on the King Street facade honoring Rebecca Ramsay Reese and a wood one under the porch at the entry way to the building. The bronze plaque states that William Ramsay was the first mayor of Alexandria. This is incorrect. Alexandria did not have an elected Mayor form of government until after a change in the Town Charter in 1780. William Ramsay had been named "Lord Mayor" of Alexandria, an honorary position, in the 1760s.

⁵¹ "Progress Reported on Ramsay House Dedication Plans", AG, 2/1/1956, p.1; "To Honor Mrs. Reese, Ramsay House to be Dedicated, Saturday, April 14", AG, 3/6/1956, p.1; "Ramsay Job Architect to Give Lecture", AG, 4/5/1956, p.1; "Colorful Ceremonies Will Mark Ramsay House Dedication", AG, 4/14/1956, p.B-6; Brochure, "Dedication Ceremonies for The Ramsay House", Ramsay MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

that all other accounts of the preservation movement in Alexandria were "false history" and "revisionist history" and that his account, based largely on the personal recollections of his friends, was made "to set the record straight." In Col. Glasgow's version of events surrounding the reconstruction of the Ramsay House the whole process was entirely controlled by Rebecca Ramsay Reese who made the restoration of the building her "thing", to use Col. Glasgow's phrase. In his version Mrs. Reese was upset because the building was being used as a brothel and she succeeded in closing it during World War II when there were not enough men around to protest the act. Glasgow's account notes that Mrs. Reese continued her "campaign" for many years until finally, "After War II, she finally was successful in overcoming the opposition of those who believed that if she wanted the damn place restored so much why didn't she just do it and live in it." According to his account, "Rebecca, however, continued to live in a fine old late Federal brick house at the northeast corner of St. Asaph and Cameron streets where she took in borders. [sic.]"⁵² Col. Glasgow distorts the facts with respect to Rebecca Ramsay Reese. In about 1945 the Reeses moved to 219 South St. Asaph Street and she continued to live there until her death in 1955. Thus, for the entire period during which the restoration of Ramsay House was an issue Rebecca Reese did not live on Cameron Street as stated by Col. Glasgow. The Reeses did live at 517 Cameron Street from 1923 to 1945. Glasgow also ignored Mrs. Reese's many other contributions to historic preservation in Alexandria.

The issue of whether the house was ever moved from some other location to its present site is open to interpretation. Grigg's "Interim Report" of 1946 states: "Conclusive evidence exists in the present building to justify the categorical statement that the earliest portions of the building formerly existed on some other site and were moved to the present site either in 1748 or 1749..." Grigg footnoted this statement with the notation that this information existed in the "Architect's research file." Unfortunately such a file has never been located. He went on to say that the building had likely stood "in the Jones Point neighborhood, for perhaps a quarter of a century prior to the...establishment of the city." For this piece of information, Grigg cites in a footnote verbal statements by both a Mr. L.P. Robert and Mrs. Charles Beatty Moore.⁵³ When the preparations were begun for the dedication of the building the issue of whether the building had been moved from someplace else needed to be resolved so that the dedicatory

⁵² Col. William M. Glasgow, Jr., "Alexandria: A Leader of the Restoration Movement", presented at Northern Virginia Community College, October 15, 1983. Typescript copy at Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

⁵³ Milton L. Grigg, AIA, "Interim Report on Research: Ramsay House Restoration for the Alexandria Historical Society; Containing a Report and Recommendations for Selection of Period to Which the Building Should be Restored," Charlottesville, VA, June 1, 1946. Special Collections, Alexandria Library. Hereafter, Interim Report.

brochure could be clear on the subject. This was a subject of discussion at a meeting of the Ramsay House Committee on March 5, 1956. The Committee knew of Grigg's strong views. According to the minutes, in an attempt to resolve the issue, the Committee asked to meet with Kitty Reese, one of Mrs. Reese's daughters. She told the committee that "it was her mother's strong conviction that the house had been built where it now stands, and that the date was about 1724."⁵⁴ Mrs. Reese's views were equally as strong as Grigg's, and since the building was to be dedicated to her the Committee wanted to show proper deference. Given the conflicting stories about the origin of the house the dedication brochure was diplomatically silent about the issue.

Grigg's conclusion that the house was moved is not inconsistent with common building practices in eighteenth-century Alexandria. Smaller frame buildings were routinely moved from one location in the city to another. What is somewhat curious is his conclusion that the house had stood "in the Jones Point neighborhood". In the eighteenth century, Jones Point was essentially a tidal flat prone to continuous flooding and with little land area that would have been suitable for building. Nevertheless, it is likely one or two structures existed within the general Jones Point vicinity in the eighteenth century. What Grigg saw as the "Jones Point neighborhood" in the mid-twentieth century was the result of continuous fill operations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, beyond repeating local oral traditions regarding the origin of the house Grigg offers no convincing proof, either physical or documentary, in his report that the house was, in fact, moved. Grigg does note in the report that a number of building elements on the existing house had been re-used from some other eighteenth century building or buildings. Again, this was a common eighteenth building practice not only in Alexandria, but in most other Colonial settlements as well. Lumber was relatively scarce and expensive and recycling was certainly worth the labor involved.

Grigg's "restoration" decisions regarding Ramsay House were, it would appear today, arbitrary. The building he started out with and the building the city ended up with were very different. Indeed, by 1950 Grigg no longer claimed he could restore the building, but would rather "reconstruct" it. In October 1950 he wrote to the President of the Alexandria Association: "the Ramsay House is not proposed for restoration, since as stated before this is now impossible, but it is proposed to reconstruct a facimile [sic.] after demolishing the present building from the bottom of the foundations upwards and approximately eighty percent of the materials used will be new."⁵⁵ Thus, Grigg apparently felt he could transfer his

⁵⁴ Minutes of the Ramsay House Committee, March 5, 1956. Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

⁵⁵ Grigg to Frederick W. Ford, October 11, 1950. Ramsay MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library.

knowledge and experience from reconstructing eighteenth-century facsimiles in Colonial Williamsburg to a building in Alexandria. Not only were eighteenth-century Alexandria building traditions dissimilar to those at Williamsburg, building materials and forms were quite different. Ramsay House, today, resembles no other eighteenth-century building in Alexandria and with good reason, because it is not based upon Alexandria precedents. No other extant wood frame eighteenth-century building has a brick foundation. All use stone as the foundation material. None use oversize brick in English bond for foundation material. This type of foundation treatment is routinely used on virtually every reconstructed wood frame building at Colonial Williamsburg, however. The wood siding that Grigg used on Ramsay House is virtually identical to the beaded six inch exposure that is so common at Colonial Williamsburg. Research of eighteenth century wood siding in Alexandria indicates that it was commonly more than twice the width of the siding used at Colonial Williamsburg and did not display the uniformity found on the restored frame buildings there. Indeed, Grigg virtually acknowledged the differences when he re-used the wider Alexandria weatherboarding with an exposure of 12" to 13" for the siding on the east side of the building under the porch roof.

There are no extant central entrance wood frame eighteenth-century houses in Alexandria -- all are side hall plans. However, many of the reconstructed wood frame buildings at Colonial Williamsburg have a central entrance way and often center halls. The gambrel roof reconstructed by Grigg is extremely rare in Alexandria and is found on no other wood frame eighteenth-century structure, all of which have gable roof forms. However, there are several brick buildings with gambrel roofs dating from the late eighteenth century.⁵⁶ Measured drawings of the house done in 1936 by the Historic American Buildings Survey show the original gambrel roof form of the building by a dashed line. A central entrance gambrel roof form frame house, while without stylistic ties to Alexandria, is a familiar house form in Virginia's Tidewater area. This may argue somewhat for the theory of the building being re-located from another area further to the south.

Almost without exception eighteenth-century houses in Alexandria are oriented to the street with the entrance door generally opening onto the street. The Ramsay House entrance is off a courtyard. This seems particularly odd since William Ramsay was a retail merchant and he would have needed street frontage and access in order to conduct a successful business. A plausible argument can be constructed to suggest a center hall plan for the original period of construction with a doorway fronting the street and a secondary entrance fronting toward the river.

⁵⁶ See, for example, 200 Prince Street (ca. 1780) and 106 South Lee Street (1793).

Grigg's 1946 "Interim Report" relies on findings and practices of the Williamsburg architects to determine the appropriate treatment of Ramsay House. Indeed, the report notes that both Singleton P. Moorehead and Walter Macomber, also members of the original Williamsburg architects as well as Fiske Kimball, then Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, advised Grigg on restoration plans for Ramsay House. Macomber, who had been Resident Architect at Williamsburg, came to Alexandria to conduct on-site inspections of Grigg's exploratory demolition of portions of the interior of the house in February and March of 1946.⁵⁷ Kimball, the first chair of the Department of Architecture at the University of Virginia, served as a member of the Advisory Board of Architects for the Williamsburg restoration project. While Ramsay House is a cultural icon in Alexandria, it is more representative of the early phase of the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg than of the building traditions of eighteenth-century Alexandria.

No record of a final report on the "restoration" of Ramsay House has been located. The original of the Interim Report and the original photographs are included in the collection of Grigg's papers at Alderman Library at the University of Virginia along with numerous other documents relating to his work on the building. The fact that no final version of a report on Ramsay House is included may indicate that one was never done.

The final form of the Ramsay House is also curiously similar to a gambrel roof house plan published in the November 1937 issue of *House and Garden*. That issue included articles about the architecture, furniture and gardens of the Williamsburg restoration as well as decorating advice on how to furnish a home with the Williamsburg touch. Importantly the issue contained plans for three houses designed by "the architects of the Restoration, Messrs. Perry, Shaw and Hepburn" which were described by the President of Colonial Williamsburg as having "true Williamsburg characteristics" and which "are the only plans for such houses approved by the Restoration."⁵⁸ The plans for "House I" are for a wood sided gambrel roof house with porch that bears a striking resemblance to Ramsay House. More striking, however, is a house designed by Grigg in 1936 in the Belle Haven section of Fairfax County. That house published in the June 1936 issue of *American Architect and Architecture*, is virtually identical to Ramsay House complete with gambrel roof, central entry, four section one story porch with wood columns, three dormer windows, and one interior and one exterior end brick

⁵⁷ Interim Report

⁵⁸ Kenneth Chorley, "By Way of Introduction", House and Garden, November 1937, p.37.

chimney. That house was "designed in the 18th Century Virginia style."⁵⁹ That Grigg's investigation and research turned up an original design for Ramsay House that is so similar to published mid-twentieth century residential buildings done in an eighteenth-century mode is nothing short of miraculous. [Illustration #8]



Illus. #8--Ramsay House look-alike in Belle Haven, Fairfax County, designed by Milton Grigg in 1936. Source: American Architect and Architecture, 1936

By the time that the general contractors had finished implementing Grigg's design for the Ramsay House in the 1950s, little original fabric was left. The 1942 fire had destroyed original materials and Grigg's destructive testing in the spring of

⁵⁹ "House of Richard B. English, Belle Haven, Alexandria, Virginia, Milton L. Grigg, Architect", American Architect and Architecture, June 1936, p.81. I am grateful to John Burns, AIA, of the Historic American Building Survey for bringing this reference to my attention.

1946 resulted in the removal of much of the existing plaster work on the walls and ceiling as well as floor boards and joists. What remained was subjected to repeated vandalism during the period 1946 to 1950 when the building was vacant and essentially open to the elements. Thus, by the time that the reconstruction work began in November of 1950 the building was essentially rebuilt on what was perceived to be the historic footprint. For example, wall studs are all new 2 x 4s, ceiling joists are also new 2x lumber, the floors are new as are the roof joists and the roof itself, except for a small section of 18th century siding under the porch all of the siding is new, all of the plaster work is new, the porch is new as is the chimney on the south side as well as the English bond brick foundation.

Grigg's revised 1955 working drawings for the building do not indicate re-use of any historic materials. Indeed, Grigg's 1955 written material specifications for the reconstruction call for the use of entirely new material for every phase of the project. The words renovate, fix, clean up, rehabilitate do not appear in the document. The only element of the building that the contractor was told to reuse were the existing shutters which were not original to the house.⁶⁰ The Historic American Building Survey drawings of 1936 note that the shutters are "not original." The framing for a number of windows on the west side of the building is original eighteenth century building fabric.⁶¹ Everything else in the building is new and Grigg's plans were detailed to the point that he had full size section drawings of such things as crown molding, profiles of the fireplace mantles and molding as well as the stair rail. It is not known if the rubble stone foundation re-uses stones from the original foundation.

Additionally, the garden is a fanciful creation that does not attempt to claim historical precedents. While the intention may have been the laudable goal of "restoring" the building in the mid-1940s, by the time the project reached fruition in 1955 and 1956 it was an all new building that tried to give the impression of a late eighteenth century house.

APPENDIX

Two of the Alexandria architects associated with the preservation and reconstruction of Ramsay House, Milton Grigg and Thomas Waterman, were hugely influential in establishing restoration architecture as a legitimate part of the practice of architecture in the middle of the 20th century. They had worked

⁶⁰ Ramsay House specifications included in the Papers of Milton L. Grigg in Special Collections, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

⁶¹ While not noted in the Grigg documents, the window framing system was observed in 1994 when the building was resided.

together as part of the original team of architects that designed the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg in the late 1920s and early 1930s. When Rockefeller disbanded the Williamsburg architectural office in 1933 because he believed that the work was complete, both Grigg and Waterman went into private practice and ended up in Alexandria. Here they became involved with the preservation of some of the City's most revered local landmarks including the Stabler-Leabear Apothecary Shop and Gadsby's Tavern in addition to Ramsay House. In their work here they brought to bear a distinct Williamsburg approach to treating historic buildings that had been learned in the early years of their work at Colonial Williamsburg.

MILTON LATOUR GRIGG, 1905-1982⁶²

Grigg was an Alexandria native who was born in the Del Ray section of the city. He received his architecture degree from the University of Virginia in 1929 and almost immediately began work as part of the original architectural team working on the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg. When the architectural staff was disbanded in 1933, Grigg established his own architectural firm where he continued to practice until his retirement in 1980. The main office for his firm was in Charlottesville, although for approximately forty years Grigg maintained a satellite office in Alexandria, first on Prince Street and later on Stevenson Avenue. Of the original Williamsburg architects who worked in Alexandria, Milton Grigg subsequently did the most work in the city.

His preservation and restoration work drew heavily on his experiences at the Williamsburg restoration. In the 1930s Grigg was the restoration architect for Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home in Charlottesville.⁶³ In Alexandria his restoration work included Gadsby's Tavern in the period 1932-1934 for which he did "paint research and decorative schemes"⁶⁴ as well as the restoration of the first floor of the Tavern; work at the 1783 Benjamin Dulany house at 601 Duke Street for the noted preservationist Howard Joynt in 1945; and, work on the eighteenth century residence of W.H.S. Stevens, one of the more active preservationists in the city at 312 Queen Street in 1956. His preservation and restoration work was widely praised and summed up his contributions to the profession of architecture by stating: "Under his leadership, restoration of historic

⁶² See, Joseph M. Lasala, "The Life and Career of Milton LaTour Grigg, FAIA," School of Architecture, University of Virginia, unpublished mss., Fall 1990. Copy at Special Collections, Alexandria Public Library.

⁶³ "Restoring Monticello Gardens", editorial, AG, 9/15/1939, p.4.

⁶⁴ Dorothy H. Kabler, "Restoration of Gadsby's Wins Civic Support Over the Years, Work is Done by Patriotic Groups and Individuals", AG, 1/1/1951, p.2.

buildings was made a respectable endeavor for architects.”⁶⁵

When the Old and Historic Alexandria District Board of Architectural Review was established in 1946, one of two positions on the Board for a “certified architect” was left open at the request of Paul Delaney, the City Councilman who introduced the ordinance. Delaney made the request because he expected that Grigg would be returning to Alexandria and could be appointed a member of the Board. However, Grigg never did re-establish a residence in Alexandria.

Grigg and his firm were prolific and efficient architects and the work ranged widely. However, he was nationally known as an ecclesiastical architect and designed a hundred or more churches nationwide. In the historic district of Alexandria he was responsible for the design of the Parish Halls for both Christ Church on North Washington Street (1950) and St. Paul’s Episcopal Church on South Pitt Street (1947).

Grigg was quite generous in sharing his knowledge of eighteenth and early nineteenth century architecture with the citizens of Alexandria and lectured on a number of occasions to such organizations as the Alexandria Association, the Alexandria Historical Society and local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.⁶⁶ Of course, Grigg’s generosity in this area was rewarded with the public’s knowledge of his work which paid dividends in commission referrals.

THOMAS TILESTON WATERMAN, 1900-1951

According to a recent article in the *Winterthur Portfolio*, Waterman “became involved in most of the key projects in the eastern seaboard states that affected buildings of the colonial period and the early Republic. His attitudes and opinions influenced many decisions bearing on the treatment or recording of historic American buildings.” He was one of the original architects for the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg beginning in 1928 and was responsible for the restoration or reconstruction of such buildings as the Governor’s Palace. His association with Williamsburg ended when the architectural office was disbanded in 1933. Shortly thereafter he joined the staff of the newly established Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) as assistant and then associate architect in the National Park Service. In that capacity he was responsible for the supervision of all drawings that emanated from the HABS offices. He remained with HABS until 1942. Beginning in the mid-1930s he was associated with the work of Henry Francis

⁶⁵ See, “The Making of a Profession, Ten Who Made a Difference”, *Inform*, v.5, no.3, pp. 24-25. Grigg entry by Roulhac Toledano.

⁶⁶ See, for example, “Milton Grigg Will Address Civic Group”, *AG*, 1/30/1947, p.1, and “John Alexander Chapter DAR Hears Talk on Historical Sites, Architect Milton Grigg Shows Slides of Many Virginia Shrines”, *AG*, 10/24/1947, p.16.

duPont and was largely responsible for the expansion of duPont's mansion and the creation of the Winterthur museum. He was the author of a number of influential architectural books including Domestic Colonial Architecture of Tidewater Virginia (1932) with John Barrows; Mansions of Virginia (1946); and, The Dwellings of Colonial America (1950).⁶⁷ Rebecca Ramsay Reese, one of the most prominent preservationists in the city, called Waterman "a great genius".⁶⁸

Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary

When Waterman began work at HABS he resided in Alexandria at 517 Cameron Street where he rented a room from Rebecca Ramsay Reese, the most active and well known preservationist in the city during the 1930s, 40s and 50s. While living in Alexandria, Waterman was responsible for a number of influential restoration projects including the facade and window restoration at the Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary at 105 and 107 South Fairfax Street in 1936-1938.⁶⁹ Waterman did succeed in creating one of the most visually distinctive facades in Alexandria. He also partially restored the early nineteenth century appearance of portions of the interior of the building. For his work on the building, Waterman received an architectural award from the Washington Board of Trade in 1940 which cited the project as "a successful effort to honestly restore a landmark of Alexandria to its original historical character."⁷⁰ Waterman was most generous to the Landmarks Society of Alexandria which owned the building and he provided his services gratis.

⁶⁷ Fay Campbell Kaynor, "Thomas Tileston Waterman, Student of American Colonial Architecture," Winterthur Portfolio, v. 20, nos. 2 & 3, Autumn 1985, p. 103. Hereafter, Kaynor, "Thomas Tileston Waterman." See also, Dorothy Holcombe Kabler, "Landmarks Society Pay Tribute to Thomas T. Waterman for Gifts of His Art in Restoration Work", AG, 1/30/1951, p.5.

⁶⁸ Diaries of Rebecca Ramsay Reese, Entry for January 21, 1951. Ramsay MMS Collection, Special Collections, Alexandria Library. Waterman's funeral at the National Cathedral was attended by a virtual who's who of leaders of the nascent historic preservation movement in the United States including Frederick Rath, the first Executive Director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Helen Duprey Bullock, the Trust's first historian, David E. Finley, Chairman of the Board of the Trust and Director of the National Gallery of Art, Worth Bailey the Director of the Trust's Woodlawn Plantation and former curator of Mt. Vernon, and Delos H. Smith, an architect and early staff member of HABS and who had practiced with Waterman.

⁶⁹ Building Permit #2767, 9/19/1938. City of Alexandria Code Enforcement Bureau files; see also, Kaynor, "Thomas Tileston Waterman," p.137; "Historic Pharmacy Converted Into Museum by Local Society", AG, 4/28/1939, p.1.

⁷⁰ "Restoration of Pharmacy Brings Award, Landmark Society, Architect Honored for Apothecary Project", AG, 3/14/1940, p.1.

Gadsby's Tavern

Waterman was also responsible for the re-creation of Gadsby's Tavern Ballroom, 138 North Royal Street. The original woodwork including two mantelpieces, cornices and wainscoting from the first floor and the original ballroom on the second floor including two door frames, two mantelpieces, the musicians gallery, wainscot and cornice had been removed from the building in May of 1917 and reinstalled at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.⁷¹ Waterman went to New York and took measurements of the woodwork at the Metropolitan and recreated the ballroom in Alexandria in 1936.⁷² In 1936 along with Delos Smith, another HABS architect living in Alexandria, he restored the first-floor facade of Gadsby's and designed a compatible doorway to replace the original which had also been removed to the Metropolitan. This work included the removal of inappropriate 1878 storefront windows. The new doorway was only meant to mimic an eighteenth-century door and did not pretend to re-create the original. That would come later. In addition, Waterman was also responsible for the restoration of the stairs and the initial work on the second floor lodging rooms of the City Hotel building.⁷³ His knowledge of and work dealing with the historic architecture was summarized in his article "The Architecture of Alexandria, Virginia" that appeared in the February 1945 issue of Antiques (v.47, no.2).

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⁷¹ Kabler, "Restoration of Gadsby's Wins Civic Support".

⁷² Thomas Tileston Waterman, "Gadsby's Tavern Ballroom" in Early American Rooms, Russell Hawes Kettell, ed. (Portland, Maine; Southworth-Anthoensen Press, 1936), pp. 127-30. See also, Gadsby's Tavern, HABS No. VA-100, Thomas T. Waterman, author, 5/6/41.

⁷³ For the restoration of the first windows see, Building Permit #1712, 6/9/1936. City of Alexandria Code Enforcement Bureau files.

WILLIAM RAMSAY -- "The Romulus of Alexandria"
by T. Michael Miller

William Ramsay was one of Alexandria's early founders, and an outstanding business and political leader during the 18th century. Born in Kirkcaldy in the Galloway district of Scotland in 1716, he immigrated to Virginia around 1742 where he "became interested in the trade of the upper Potomac as early as 1744."

On July 13, 1749, during the first sale of town lots, Ramsay purchased parcels 46 and 47 which were situated on the northeast corner of King and Fairfax Streets and extended east to the Potomac River. Here Ramsay resided, conducted business, and maintained a wharf. There was also a smokehouse and kitchen on the lot.

Shipping merchant Ramsay engaged in business with John Dixon until 1757 when the partnership was dissolved and Dixon returned to Whitehaven, England.

As a town trustee Ramsay held numerous positions of civic responsibility including in 1754 adjuster of weights and seals with fellow merchant and business partner John Carlyle. Furthermore, Ramsay was a member of the Committee of Safety, superintended the completion of the Fairfax County Courthouse, was the town's first postmaster in 1772, served as colonel of the militia regiment, and for many years sat as a Fairfax County Justice of the Peace.

William Ramsay married Ann McCarty, the daughter of Dennis McCarty, Sr. and Sarah Ball. The couple were the parents of eight children including a son Dennis who was elected mayor of Alexandria in 1789 and 1793.

In 1761, William Ramsay was so admired that his fellow citizens elected him the town's only honorary Lord Mayor. The enthusiastic inhabitants decorated him with a golden chain bearing a medal. "Upon one side was represented the infant state of Alexandria and its commodious harbour..." After the mock election and investment were over:

"the Lord Mayor and Common Council, preceded by officers of State, Sword and Mace bearers and accompanied by many gentlemen of the town and country, wearing blue sashes under crosses, made a grand procession...with drums, trumpets and a band of music, colors flying." The shipping in the harbor displayed flags and banners while guns fired during the afternoon. A very elegant entertainment was prepared at the Coffee House, where the new Lord Mayor and his entourage sat down to a sumptuous repast. This was followed by a ball given by the Scotch gentlemen at which a numerous and brilliant company of ladies danced. The ceremonies ended with fireworks,

bonfires, and other demonstrations." [Maryland Gazette June 22, 1762] William Ramsay died on 10 February 1785 and was interred in Christ Church Cemetery, North Washington Street.



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